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Racism and Russian Football Supporters' Culture

A Case for Concern?

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Why is Russian football culture so racist and xenophobic? While many countries have problems with racism, abundant evidence shows this is particularly bad in Russia and, indeed, a major concern ahead of the 2018 World Cup. We argue that, while a host of contributing factors in some sense “overdetermine” high levels of racism among Russian fans, the main reason is the deep penetration of the international far right. In the 1990s, the under-institutionalized nature of Russian fan culture was unable to organize resistance to the encroachment of the far right.

Why is Russian football fan culture so racist? Why has the Russian fan scene developed in ways such that there are serious concerns about the safety of non-white fans and players ahead of the 2018 World Cup (Arnold 2015b; Rainsford 2015; Walker 2014)? To what extent does this unfortunate aspect of football reflect domestic or external causes? Such questions are important as they promise to extend the analysis of sports cultures and racisms beyond Great Britain and the United States and into “countries that are not part of an explicit colonial legacy” (Doidge 2015a, 250). Understanding the contours of overt racism in countries outside the West is important for the purpose of making comparisons. Such questions are also important because security is a prime concern at any sporting mega-event—and particularly so at the World Cup, where the nature of the threat is very different from its precursor of the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 (Orttung and Zhemukhov 2017). For instance, Sochi was just one city, but the World Cup will take place in eleven and thus safety must also apply to the transport networks between those cities (see the introduction to this issue of *Problems of Post-Communism*). Studies that help to understand the peculiarities of racist subcultures in contexts such as the Russian one can be valuable in preventing violent incidents.

Russian football supporter (*bolel'shchiki*) subculture embraces diverse sets of individuals, not all of whom

express racist sentiments. Julia Glathe (2016) cites the word *Okolofutbol'shchiki* as the term right-wing hooligans and fans use to describe themselves. Borisov (2009) distinguishes between “Casuals,” “Supporters,” and “Leds.” While distinguishing different levels of fan support with such gradations may be useful for some purposes, it also isolates the problem to such a degree that the connections between elements of Russia's football supporter culture become obscured. Therefore, this article generalizes to all supporters (*bolel'shchiki*) as more descriptive of the entirety of fans who either actively support or tacitly allow the expression of such opinions in their stadiums. As will become apparent later, the complicity of tacit acceptance is a significant part of the explanation.

Not much has been written specifically on Russian *bolel'shchiki* culture (although see Arnold 2017; Borisov 2009; Glathe 2016; Gorshunov and Gorshunova 2015; Tsyganova 2016). Nonetheless, its racism and xenophobia are apparent from news stories and reports, most infamously in recent times in accounts of the street brawls with English fans at the Euro 2016 football championships played in France. While it is difficult to make firm comparisons, numerous sources of evidence suggest that the racism of Russian *bolel'shchiki* culture is certainly worse than racism in football culture in England currently and possibly also at its historic height. Comparisons with other parts of Europe are more difficult, but once again Russian fan culture seems as or more racist and xenophobic. Why are Russian fans so racist?

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This article argues that Russian fan culture is so racist due to a heavy far-right presence. The far right attained such a level of prominence because they entered the *bolel'shchiki* subculture when its development was nascent, under-institutionalized, and unable to defend itself. Thus, the main reason for the strength of racist attitudes in Russian football in the present is its weakness in the past. The qualifier “main” reason is important here, as Russia is a case in which the racism of *bolel'shchiki* attitudes is somewhat “overdetermined” by numerous historical and political legacies. Thus, while it may not be surprising that racist attitudes are so dominant in Russian fan subculture, the *form* in which such attitudes manifest themselves assuredly suggests that an important role is played by the international far right.

Methodologically, the data for this article come from four sources. First, we searched for academic articles on racism and Russian football using standard databases. Second, we accessed the website of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis and searched for all articles containing the word *futbol'* and some associated terms such as *bolel'shchiki* and *fanaty*. Third, with generous financial support from Muskingum University, coauthor Richard Arnold traveled to Russia in 2016 and 2017, where he visited eight of the eleven World Cup cities and met with individuals connected to the organization of the tournament as well as others who had an interest but no formal connection. Fourth, coauthor Karl Manuel Veth maintains a website focused on Russian football called *futbolgrad.com*, which publishes English-language news stories on the Russian game and offers some expert commentary on developments (including racism). This includes material from both Russian-language media sources and insiders at Russian clubs who must remain anonymous. Together, these four sources provided us with sufficient data to be informed on the state of racism in the current Russian game.

The article proceeds first by defining the concept of racism and distinguishing “overt racism” from the larger concept of racism broadly understood. It then provides evidence for the claim that Russian fan subculture has a high degree of overt racism. While systematic comparisons of hooligan subcultures in different countries are beyond the scope of this paper, Russia's fans are probably among the most racist in Europe. Second, the article demonstrates the penetration of far-right political groups into *bolel'shchiki* subculture. Third, the article argues that such groups were able to establish a presence in fan subculture because they entered Russian society in the 1990s and early 2000s when the *bolel'shchiki* subculture was only weakly institutionalized. Fourth, the article examines other contributory factors that in some senses “overdetermine” the overt racism in Russian hooligan subculture—in particular, Soviet-era ideological legacies and the Chechen wars.

THE RACISM OF RUSSIAN *BOLEL'SHCHIKI* CULTURE

This section recounts the major incidents of Russian overt racism in fan subculture. After a discussion of what racism is and where it manifests itself in football, it defines the phenomenon of interest as being “overt racism.” It then uses data from the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, as well as the now-defunct human rights publication *Bigotry Monitor*, to catalogue incidents of overt racism in Russian supporters' culture. The litany of incidents of overt racism leads to the impression that the Russian hooligan subculture is among the most racist in Europe, a claim substantiated by a brief examination of overt racism in other countries. The next section argues that the greater presence of overt racism is mainly determined by the subculture's penetration by the far right.

Racism is a very complex ideology and manifests itself throughout society in a variety of ways, including in football culture. Broadly speaking, we may define racism as the belief that skin color accounts for or predicts behaviors in individuals and that this can be extrapolated out to posit the superiority of one race over another. It is closely related to xenophobia, which sees culture (usually national culture) in much the same way racism regards race. Racism can exist at multiple levels, from the conscious to the unconscious, such as when the black Italian player Mario Balotelli is described in the media as “king of the jungle” or “impulsive sportsman,” discursive terms that rely on assumptions about his racial origins (Mauro 2016, 140).

Infamously, racism exists among football fans. One classification used by Back, Crabbe, and Solomos (1999) distinguishes between overt forms of racism (such as chants, race-based insults, and racist violence) and what they call “everyday racism” (422).¹ Examples of the latter are the paucity of Asians at all levels of English football, including the spectators who watch the game (Garland and Rowe 2001). There is also the “structural” racist fact that there are now many black players but few black managers (Burdsey 2011, 5). Just as in society more generally, ugly racism touches every corner of the beautiful game.

While all such concerns are valid, this paper focuses solely on displays of racism such as the display of symbols or violence (“overt racism”) committed in its name. Such overt racism is easy to identify and in theory may be measured without difficulty. Although there are almost certainly other ways in which the ideology of racism penetrates Russian supporters' culture, they are subtler and of less immediate concern in anticipation of the world's largest sporting tournament.

There is no comprehensive public statistical monitoring of overt racist incidents in *bolel'shchiki* culture, but since Russia was awarded the World Cup in 2012, the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis and FARE² (Football Against Racism in Europe) have been monitoring such

incidents (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 2015b, 2017). The methodology of the SOVA Center for tracking racist crimes strives to be rigorous,³ but it is inevitable with such phenomena that many instances do not get reported. Indeed, the concentration in the SOVA reports on racist acts within or in the immediate vicinity of stadiums necessarily excludes cases that may be perpetrated by football fans with a less obvious connection to their teams (such as “white wagon” attacks—where every non-white person in a metro car is beaten—occurring before or after football matches). Similarly, some of the categories in the report are not mutually exclusive, and the first report covers two seasons (2012–2014) whereas the others concern only one season each.

Nevertheless, SOVA is widely accepted as the premier monitoring institute for racist crimes in Russia and is used by non-governmental bodies such as the United Nations (see SOVA 2009). The results are therefore almost certainly a significant underestimate, but they do (along with occasional reports from newspapers) provide evidence of the problem. Table 1.1 presents a statistical summary of racist acts in Russian football between 2012 and 2017.

As is evident in Table 1.2, racist violence and discriminatory acts in Russian games directed at people from the Caucasus are a major problem. For example, on August 22, 2012, fifty people from the Zenit St. Petersburg “Ultras” Snake City firm attacked fans from Anzhi Makhachkala, injuring three (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 11). Similarly, on September 23, 2012, in Nizhny Novgorod, fans from CSKA Moscow used clubs to attack people from the Caucasus (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 12). Such attacks took place alongside numerous documented incidents of racist chants and propaganda. In 2013, football-connected assaults on people from the Caucasus took place in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Saransk, Krasnodar, and Rostov (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 19). While there were no recorded incidents of violence between January and May 2014 (due to the winter hiatus in the Russian football calendar), May 15, 2014, saw a rally of football fans in the town of Pushkino (Saratov region). The ostensible cause was the murder of

TABLE 1.2
Racist Acts in Russian Football, 2014–2017, by Target

Target/Action	2012–2014 Seasons	2014–15 Season	2015–16 Season	2016–17 Season
Far-right/neo-Nazi symbols displays	72	78	79	79
People from the Caucasus	22	5	9	3
Central Asians	-	-	1	0
Africans	5	10	5	1
Jews	-	-	1	4
Asians	-	-	-	1
Homosexuals	-	1	-	1
Other	6	-	6	-
TOTAL	105	95	101	89

Source: SOVA and FARE (2015a, 2015b, 2017).

Spartak fan Leonid Safiannikov by a group, one of whom was the Uzbek national Zhakongkir Akhmedov. According to reports, 300–500 people marched through the town to migrants’ dorms, destroying market stalls on the way (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 25–26). The sole incident of physical violence in the 2014–2015 season came on September 28 in Krasnodar, when a group of fans attacked Caucasians who were dancing the Lezginka; they accompanied their attacks with verbal assaults on the Caucasians (SOVA and FARE 2015b, 10).

The greatest display of anti-Caucasian sentiment connected with football came on December 11, 2010, on Manezh Square, in front of the Kremlin. According to various accounts, from 5,000 up to as many as 50,000 nationalists and *bolel’shchiki* demonstrated for the cessation of federal funds to the Caucasus regions and in protest against ethnic crime. The rally ended with a series of violent hate attacks on Caucasians and was followed by sympathy protests later in the week in cities around Russia. The rally had initially begun as a memorial to murdered Spartak Moscow fan Egor Sviridorov, killed in a fight with a native of the Caucasus, but the legitimate memorial march turned into something much uglier. There is also evidence of racist attacks outside the football arena, although the data are admittedly more idiosyncratic. Borisov (2009) reports that on April 20, 2008 (Hitler’s birthday), a fight between fans of Spartak Moscow and ethnic Kabards and Balkars broke out about 140 kilometers from Nalchik. The fans were in the North Caucasus to watch their team play. The fans fared badly in the conflict, however, with two being whipped and others suffering gunshot and knife wounds.

As demonstrated again in Table 1.2, *bolel’shchiki* have also disproportionately targeted black Africans, including players on Russian teams. This violence stands out due to the extremely small numbers of people of African descent in Russia. For example, Zenit St. Petersburg’s Landscrona fans published an open manifesto in which they attempted to influence the selection and transfer policies of the club. In

TABLE 1.1
Racist Acts in Russian Football, 2012–2017, by Type of Act

Act	2012–2014 Seasons	2014–15 Season	2015–16 Season	2016–17 Season
Banners, other visual displays in the stands, graffiti	85	82	86	84
Discriminatory chanting	8	10	10	2
Violent incidents	21	1	5	2
Rallies	2	0	0	0
TOTAL	116	95	101	89

Source: SOVA and FARE (2015a, 2015b, 2017).

the manifesto, the Landsrona “Ultra” group demanded that Zenit abstain from hiring black or gay players after the club had paid €95 million for two black players—the Brazilian forward Hulk and the Belgian midfielder Axel Witsel. The manifesto declared that “we’re not racist but we see the absence of black players at Zenit as an important tradition. It would allow Zenit to maintain the national identity of the club, which is the symbol of St. Petersburg.”⁴ Until the acquisition of Witsel and Hulk, Zenit was the only top club in Russia that had not yet signed a black player. The Landsrona fan group was adamant that their club should only consist of players from “brotherly Slav nations, such as Ukraine and Belarus as well as from the Baltic states and Scandinavia. We have the same mentality and historical and cultural background as these nations.” While such brazen displays of racist antipathy may appear in the West from time to time, the authorities always rebuke them harshly, whereas in Russia such views were considered a difference of opinion.

Other top black players have refused to sign for Zenit after receiving death threats from fans (Fyodorov 2012). The club refused to condemn or even address the manifesto issued by Landsrona (Matusevich 2013), but in the period since has signed several African players. Zenit fans made monkey chants and threw banana skins on the pitch when their Afro-Brazilian star Hulk touched the ball. In 2011, fans in Samara threw a banana at Brazil’s Roberto Carlos, who was playing for Anzhi Makhachkala (Borden 2015). Acts targeting African players have been reported in the lower leagues as well, such as when Burundian-Russian Ted Nitirubuza, a defender for Solyaris Moscow, was taunted by supporters from his own club (Borden 2015). Undoubtedly many more such incidents occur daily but do not get reported. While such actions may not physically harm anyone, they are nonetheless concerning for the environment they create.

Russian football matches have also seen the brazen display of far-right banners and symbols that are intimately connected with racism. One of the favorite symbols for display is the “Celtic Cross”—supposedly emblematic of the ancient roots of racist culture (Arnold 2016)—and a symbol displayed on no less than 39 different occasions in the period 2012–2014 (SOVA and FARE 2015a). This has included incidents of fans unveiling flags in the stadium, stalls outside stadiums selling items emblazoned with the symbol, and acts of graffiti involving the Celtic Cross. Sightings of the symbol were also reported in the World Cup host cities of Ekaterinburg, Moscow, Rostov, and Saransk. On August 11, 2007, Spartak Moscow fans unveiled a racist banner in a match against Samara’s Krylia Sovetov that offended Welliton, a dark-skinned Brazilian player on the Samara team (Kozhevnikova 2007).

Recent examples of racist attitudes in Russian domestic football include the high-profile Spartak Moscow vs CSKA Moscow 2016 derby, where several racist, fascist, and anti-

Semitic banners were on display (Veth 2016; SOVA and FARE 2017, 24). The anti-Semitic banners were aimed at the CSKA Moscow head coach, Leonid Slutsky, who had appeared in a promotional video for a Jewish cultural center in Moscow. Several CSKA fan groups later attacked the head coach for both the team’s performance on the field and his conduct off the field—a hint that they were unhappy with his appearance in the video (Pope 2016; SOVA and FARE 2017). Slutsky resigned following the club’s final match in 2016, stating that he was exhausted—likely due not only to the club’s poor form, but also to the political battles that had been ongoing behind closed doors. While the fans were not solely responsible for the coach’s resignation, the protests must certainly have played a major part in Slutsky’s decision to leave the club.

While fans have been slightly more constrained in matches involving international teams, there have been incidents. For example, at the Euro 2012 finals in Poland and Ukraine, Russia received enormous fines over its fans’ racist behavior (*Guardian* 2012). Perhaps the most infamous was the treatment of Cote d’Ivoire star Yaya Touré at the 2013 CSKA–Manchester City match in Moscow. Fans shouted racist abuse, unveiled a swastika, and threw banana skins at him (SOVA and FARE 2015a, 17). Because of the racist behavior, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) sanctioned the club by ordering them to play their next Champions League game against Bayern Munich with a section of the stadium closed (Jackson 2013). Of course, CSKA Moscow’s management went into denial over what had happened in the stadium, and even pointed out that their fans would go the extra mile to support their own black players (Jackson 2013). In the following season, CSKA fans also clashed with AS Roma supporters during a Champions League game in Italy, which led to UEFA punishing CSKA by having the club play in an empty stadium during their Champions League home games in the 2014–2015 season (*Guardian* 2014).

How does overt racism in Russian soccer compare with that of other footballing countries? The paucity of data and patchwork of monitoring methods makes systematic comparison difficult, but in England—the country Russians most associate with such things, as indicated by *bolel’shchiki* shops like the one visited by Arnold in Volgograd using the Union Jack (albeit, not the St. George’s Cross) as an advertising symbol—overt racism is currently less prominent than in contemporary Russia.⁵ Overt forms of racism did have a presence in domestic English football in the 1970s and 1980s, but currently have been mostly pushed out of the stadiums. Racist English fans directed insults and demeaning chants against black British players like Viv Anderson and Sol Campbell; however, the British authorities understood the severity of overt forms of racism in the game and so took measures to eliminate them. While broader structural

problems associated with racism have not been solved today, the number of overtly racist incidents has decreased and today the overt display of such sentiments is rare.

In Italy, overt racism is not reducible simply to the vocal Ultras, nor are all Ultras racist. Yet even well-intentioned individuals rely on and reproduce racist stereotypes and meanings (Mauro 2016, 117–18) and overt racism continues to color fans' views of players in Italy. Numerous monkey chants, for example, have been directed at the world-famous player Mario Balotelli, who was also scapegoated for Italy's exit from the World Cup in 2014 (Mauro 2016, 135–46). Balotelli's story and rise to fame parallels the development of an increasingly diverse Italian society, which is only now seeing large numbers of people with African descent. Likewise, in Germany throughout the 1990s there were concerns about skinhead groups giving fascist salutes during games and organizing assaults on people from Eastern Europe (SIRC n.d.). In 2014, HoGeSa (Hooligans against Salafists) organized a march in Cologne in which around 4,800 protestors marched and shouted racist slogans (*Spiegel Online* 2014). Whereas everyday racism may be more prevalent in Italy and Germany (in part due to larger communities of racially diverse groups), overt or instrumental racism in Russia gives the impression of being worse.

Compared to its contemporaries in Western Europe, Russian supporters' culture appears to be as or more overtly racist, although no country has a good record in this regard. A more apt comparison might be with the English culture of the 1970s or 1980s, when football hooliganism and overt racism were considerably worse than they are now, but such comparisons are difficult to make due to changes in and around the game. Better techniques of policing and surveillance, for example, illustrate that we may be more aware of racist incidents when they occur, rather than their number in total being different. It is also possible that a more politically correct culture exists today, while racist incidents in the past may not have been noticed or reported.

EXPLAINING THE RACISM IN RUSSIAN FOOTBALL

Why is there so much overt racism among Russian fans? This section argues that the prevalence of overt racism in Russian supporters' culture can be explained by the dominance of the far right. There is considerable evidence of the deep penetration of far-right groups into *bolel'shchiki* subculture. This section provides evidence of a heavy far-right presence in Russian fan subculture beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The next section makes the most original contribution to research on racism in Russian football—and hopes to avoid question-begging—by providing

explanations of why far-right groups were able to penetrate so deeply into fan culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. Before that, however, we demonstrate that the presence of the far right in Russian fan subculture is unusually strong.

Those connections between Russian football fans and far right organizations are evident in a number of examples. A SOVA and FARE (2017, 8) report even speaks of “the dominance of far-right groups in the terraces” and is replete with instances of far-right symbols being displayed in and around Russian football matches. Football fans have also been attending other far right causes and events, suggesting the far right use football to popularize their own cause. To begin, a case on March 16, 2008, where 15 neo-Nazis stabbed and killed 20-year old antifascist Aleksei Krylov. According to the report, the assailants had used the Spartak Moscow football fan website to discuss the attack and how to prepare for it (SOVA 2008). Similarly, far-right groups tried to portray as an “inter-ethnic conflict” the murder of a young Spartak Moscow fan, Yuri Volkov, on July 10, 2010, during a scuffle with three Chechens. Volkov himself was not a right radical, but the memorial gathering on July 17 saw xenophobic graffiti sprayed at the spot where he was killed, despite the pleas of the organizers for no political or racist banners to be displayed (Alperovich and Kozhevnikova 2010).

Similarly, Glathe (2016) uncovered evidence of collaboration between racist groups and football fans through a reconstruction of “the virtual network of football fans and far right actors” evident in fan pages with hyperlinks to “blogs, web pages, and internet forums with a clear link to far-right groups” (Glathe 2016, 1507). She concluded that the aims of football hooligans often mesh with those of far-right groups and that there have been extensive efforts by such groups to penetrate this milieu and influence its preferences. Indeed, the Russian football supporters' union (VOB) led by Aleksandr Shprygin is “known to be openly sympathetic to the far right” (SOVA and FARE 2017, 7). Further, football fan websites have been used to encourage nationalists to go and fight in Ukraine (Yudina 2014), again demonstrating the links between the subculture and far-right political groups.

Football fans have also been seen openly allying themselves with far-right groups in public. At the 2012 “Russian March,” for instance, “Straight Edge [a skinhead gang] and football fans made their contributions with chants such as ‘white race, pure blood,’ ‘keep your blood pure,’ ‘White Power,’ ‘White schools for Russians’” (SOVA 2012), and so on. The Russian March takes place every year on November 4 (Russian Unity Day), a holiday that is meant to celebrate Russian civic identity but has been commandeered by the far right (Arnold 2013) to promote a sense of ethnic exclusion. Fans of CSKA, Spartak, Dinamo, and Lokomotiv were seen at the 2013 March (SOVA 2013a) and some were involved in the Biryulevo disturbances in that same year (SOVA 2013b). The fact that football fans contributed their own column—in which they could be identified as fans—to

a racist march is further evidence that far-right groups have a strong presence in football culture.

The rally on Manezh Square mentioned in the previous section also showed evidence of far-right infiltration. The initial memorial march came about when around 500 football fans gathered on Moscow's Kronstadt Boulevard to commemorate their fallen comrade, Egor Sviridov. The march became political when racist and nationalist groups hijacked the procession and led it into Manezh Square. Approximately 5,000 football fans and racists then chanted "f**k the Caucasus" and "stop feeding the Caucasus" before the walls of the Kremlin, led in part by the main opposition candidate to Vladimir Putin, Aleksei Navalny (Arnold 2016). The resulting protests clearly alarmed the Kremlin and "dramatically raised the profile of issues of nationalism and racism in Russian society" (Verkhovsky and Kozhevnikova 2011). Far-right groups had succeeded in popularizing their cause among Russian football fans.

The earliest recorded act of mass racist soccer violence of which we are aware in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union came in 2002. The riot came after Japan defeated Russia in the group stages and so knocked them out of the World Cup. A crowd had been watching the match on free television screens erected for the purpose at several points around Moscow. The crowd of mainly boisterous young men began throwing bottles, setting fire to cars, breaking windows, and engaging in violence with each other and passersby. In the disturbances, the rioters killed one police officer and a teenager died of multiple stab wounds. Several hundred rioters then proceeded to march up Tverskaia Street and break the windows at a food store, the Moskva Hotel, and the State Duma (UCSJ 2002). The particulars of this riot suggest the prior penetration of neo-Nazi groups.

Indeed, witnesses reported hearing the rioters chanting neo-Nazi slogans. Some of the protesters were members of Aleksei Podberezkin's ultra-nationalist Spiritual Heritage movement and waved the yellow-white-black flag of Russia's imperialist movement. Numerous racist incidents also accompanied the protesters, including a Japanese citizen being beaten up before the match, an American citizen of Indian descent being assaulted at the Tverskaia metro station, and an attack on five Chinese music students. Later that evening, racist fans threw bottles at a Korean church in the Kapotnaia region of the city. Twenty young men with Russian flags beat up a man from the Caucasus at the Kitai-Gorod metro station (UCSJ 2002). The violence was so serious that it provoked much speculation as to its causes.

There were a few different answers to this question. Russian prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov argued that neo-Nazi groups had planned the violence as the crowd size provided anonymity for them. However, the Ministry of the Interior and a spokeswoman for the Prosecutor's Office, Svetlana Petrenko, both did not believe that the violence was organized. Others, such as Russian Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, blamed skinheads but argued that the

authorities had facilitated the riots by inadequate policing numbers (in contrast to the earlier policing on May 1 and May 9) in part to ease the passage of a bill countering extremism. Sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky wrote in *The Moscow Times* that "It requires either extraordinary carelessness or malicious intent to first gather a drunken crowd in the center of Moscow and then send the police home to watch the soccer [game]. In fact, most likely it was a mixture of the two, as is usually the case in this country" (UCSJ 2002). Following the riot, the authorities reconsidered the wisdom of allowing crowds to gather to watch the World Cup on free screens (BBC 2002).

There was a political subtext to the match, as Russia and Japan have never signed an official peace treaty after World War II. Furthermore, the two countries still held political animosity toward each other over the status of the Kuril Islands, which Japan involuntarily ceded to Russia after the war (Clark 2016). There may have been a more insidious motive as well. As Zyuganov pointed out, the display of racist symbols and physical crimes committed against those racially different provided the perfect background for the passage of a bill designed to combat extremism. The bill stated that it "outlawed the spreading of propaganda based on racial or national superiority, the use of Nazi symbols, the creation of armed groups and calls for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order."⁶ If dissenting voices in the Russian establishment desired evidence for the necessity of such a bill, then the events following the match against Japan amply provided it. This first notable disorder caused by Russian *bolel'shchiki* is also evidence for the contention that far-right groups began penetrating Russian football in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The extent to which racist ideas have become entrenched in Russian fan subculture can be seen in the great lengths some fans go to defend them. For instance, football hooligans attacked two policemen who tried to take a racist banner from fans during a match between Lokomotiv Moscow and Dinamo Moscow (Kozhevnikova 2009). Similarly, a fan from Kirov Dinamo received a sentence in October 2014 for participation in the activities of a banned organization (SOVA 2015). An organization of football fans called TOYS (The Opposition Young Supporters) was added to the federal list of banned organizations in July 2017 (SOVA 2017). Such incidents raise the question of how far-right groups became so entrenched in Russian football subculture.

THE DEEP PENETRATION OF THE FAR RIGHT

This section provides an explanation for why both international and domestic far-right groups were able to entrench themselves so easily in Russian football fan subculture. It argues that the weakness of Russian football subculture coming out of the Soviet Union allowed far-right groups

to establish a significant presence. Legacies of Soviet fan culture and the absence of positive replacements in the new milieu of Russian fandom rendered a subculture susceptible to the ideas of the far right. This section turns first to Soviet football fan legacies and second to the weak institutionalization of Russian *bolel'shchiki* subculture, which led it to copy traditions from Europe. Third, it uses a few examples of anti-racist initiatives in Russian football to argue that the lack of popular resistance to such ideas is tacitly conceded by the Russian authorities.

Russian and Soviet football, which has habitually attracted crowds of mostly young men, has always been violent. Despite some games played between individual clubs and loose championships, it was not until 1936 that the Soviet League was established (Edelman 1993, 57–72). From the beginning, fans and even players engaged in all sort of violence toward each other and the referee (see Edelman 1993, 53–56; 95–102; 188–93). Some rituals of fan violence survived from the Soviet Union and provided precedent for an acceptance of fan violence related to far-right ideas. Since the 1950s, Soviet citizens had practiced a form of ritualized fighting between the fans of two clubs, known as *Stenka na Stenku* (or “wall on wall” in English). In this tradition, the youths of two areas would meet at an arranged point, and assemble in two lines. The two groups would then walk toward each other with the aim of taking out the opposition by any means necessary. The practice was officially outlawed by Soviet authorities in the 1950s, but continued into the 1980s. In the 1990s, football hooligans picked up the tradition of *Stenka na Stenku* (Bennetts 2008, 145).⁷ Some of these fights can be observed on the popular video-sharing platform YouTube, where it becomes quite apparent that the fights conducted between two contemporary hooligan groups heavily borrow from the *Stenka na Stenku* tradition.⁸ Such a history of popular violence would provide fertile ground for the advances of the international far right.

Second, in the Soviet Union, clashes between fans acted as proxies for nationality conflicts. Rivalries between Moscow-based clubs and clubs that represented various union republics within the Soviet Union—such as Dinamo Kiev (Ukraine), Ararat Erevan (Armenia), Dinamo Tbilisi (Georgia), and Zhalgiris Vilnius (Lithuania)—bear this out. In most cases, such clubs became part of a process that can be defined as “us” (the Ukrainians, Armenians, Georgians, etc.) against “them” (the Russians). Games such as the Spartak Moscow–Dinamo Kiev match, for example, were especially heated and became known as the *Superderbi* in the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, clashes between Moscow-based fans and fans from clubs such as Dinamo Kiev were quite common (Zeller 2015, 261–62). While not racist in themselves, such conflicts between nationalities provided fertile ground for the intrusion of racist groups.

The lack of positive indigenous traditions meant that much of Soviet football culture was borrowed from other countries. By the late 1970s, Soviet *fanaty* were imitating their British counterparts and writing graffiti on walls and attacking metro riders after games; “it is possible their roughhousing may have played a role in the tragic exit panic that killed as many as 340 people, many of them teen-age boys, after a 1982 UEFA cup game at Luzhniki between Spartak and a Dutch team” (Edelman 1993, 192). With perestroika, European ideas on hooliganism became even more popular among youthful fans even as attendance at football marches declined due to financial constraints. Russian fans began to establish hooligan “firms” of their own.

The 1990s saw clashes between the small “firms” that were in existence. For example, one of the first active fan groups founded after the fall of the Soviet Union was the Spartak Moscow fan group, Flint’s Crew (Zeller 2015, 265). Another group, “the Gladiators,” split from Flint’s Crew in 1996 to establish a hooligan group that was less admiring of the English and combined Russian and Italian traditions (Gladiators’ Firm n.d.). An interview with Vassilii “The Killer” related many of the violent practices of his “firm” in the late 1990s, including what he claimed was the largest fight in the post-Soviet era to date, involving some 1,000 fans in Moscow’s Sokolniki Park (Ultras-tifo 2014). While violent hooliganism is not the same thing as racism, the heavily masculine aggressive culture it promotes proved highly receptive to the ideas of the far right.

Indeed, European and American racist organizations tried to establish “franchises” in Russia in the 1990s, and “after 1997 Russian skinheads received regular support from their European and American brethren” (Shnirel’man 2007, 23). In particular, the organization “Blood and Honor—Russia” (Shnirel’man 2007, 27; Belikov 2011, 117) was established as an offshoot of its English progenitor, Combat-18. As the paramilitary wing of the National Front [UK] party, Combat-18 had tried in the 1980s to recruit members from within the English football terraces (Foer 2004) and saw in Eastern Europe generally a chance to promote their cause. After sending groups of volunteers to fight in the wars in Yugoslavia, Combat-18 entered Russia between 2002 and 2006, seeing it as “one of the last bastions of the white race” (Belikov 2011, 120).

That supporters’ culture in Russia was weak and under-institutionalized is shown in the attendance figures at football matches. We assume that the strength of a fan culture is related to the average number of fans attending matches. Table 2 shows the average attendance at Russian and Soviet games over all leagues since 1988. As can be seen, attendance patterns declined significantly in the 1990s and are still not up to Soviet levels. Even for the most popular top-flight clubs in Russia, attendance still reaches only 25,000 on average—approximately a third of the average English

TABLE 2
Average Attendance at Russian and Soviet Football Games (All Leagues), 1988–2016

Year	Average Attendance	Year	Average Attendance
1988	20,831	2002	11,643
1989	18,047	2003	11,737
1990	13,873	2004	11,574
1991	11,427	2005	12,241
1992	5,974	2006	11,890
1993	7,478	2007	13,543
1994	6,368	2008	13,334
1995	9,228	2009	12,517
1996	9,813	2010	12,250
1997	10,943	2012	12,903
1998	10,381	2013	13,180
1999	10,886	2014	11,620
2000	11,820	2015	10,306
2001	12,404	2016	11,085

Source: European Football Statistics, <http://european-football-statistics.co.uk/attn.htm>. Accessed March 6, 2017. Data for 2011 are missing.

Premier League crowd, despite Russia's having a population three times as large.

The decline in attendance in the 1990s can be explained through reference to a few discreet factors: the general economic decline of the country meant there was simply less money in the average person's pocket to pay the costs associated with fandom; the less-than-impressive quality of Russian football, as clubs often sold their most talented players to Western clubs to overcome financial hardship; and the fact that Soviet football fans had used the clubs as placeholders for nationalism, venerating stadiums as palaces of national culture. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ban on the expression of nationalist sentiment disappeared and thus football clubs no longer needed to perform the role they once had. Whatever the explanation, however, the result was the same: the absence of pre-existing cultural patterns meant there was a void to fill (Tishkov 1997).

That void was filled by European influences, including the far right, which acquired the status of "cool." In an interview with a Greek journalist, Robert Ustian of the organization CSKA Fans against Racism, argued that:

Our main "fight" is for current young generation of CSKA fans. If we create an alternative role model for them, that would be the greatest long-term achievement of our campaign. So now, when they get their "likes" for anti-racist photos, collages, and pictures they realise that it can be also "cool." (Ustian 2017)

The implication is that racist ideas had already acquired the status of "cool" in the culture of Russian football fans of the previous generation. A vehicle that had brought such ideas into Russian stands was the Italian Ultra movement.⁹ Although not all Italian Ultras, especially at first, displayed

overt racism, a significant far-right element did emerge in the 1980s and 1990s (Doidge 2015b, 155), at the very moment when it was entering into Russian football.

The events of 2013 in Rostov also demonstrate the authorities' awareness of the dangers of racist groups in Russia. Following the murder of Rostov fan Aleksandr Terekhov in a fight with two men from the Caucasus, some individuals suggested a protest similar to the already described Russian March. Organizers of the march planned to hold it on April 6, when Spartak Moscow would be visiting Rostov for a football match, with the march including supporters from both Spartak and Rostov (Mir24.ru 2013). However, the authorities did not permit the march to go ahead, and instead Rostov fans observed a silence before the match. At the time, the spokesman of the Rostov club for working with fans, Igor Kholod, said, "the rumors remain rumors. It [the desire for a march] gives the impression that someone wants to generate PR for themselves out of Terekhov's death" (Bezformata.ru 2013). The fact that clubs have recognized the necessity of working with fans to promote a healthier culture is itself a positive development, but also underlines the necessity of actively combating the influence of racist groups.

The third stream of evidence for our argument comes from a comparative perspective of how other societies have combatted overt racism and which are now being used by the Russian authorities to tackle the poisonous presence of far-right groups. To start, it was the strength of English fan subculture that helped them resist the encroachment of the far right. Attempts to incite racial hatred in the English game in the 1980s were resisted by civic organizations located within the football supporters' subculture. It was "the fans themselves that drove politics out of football" (Cass Pennant, on Newshour Extra, BBC World Service – Newshour Extra 2016). For example, many English fans had organized efforts on a more-or-less autonomous basis to expunge racism from football.

The first such organization was Leeds Fans United against Racism and Fascism (LFUARAF), which was "formed in 1987 to combat the influence of far-right groups at Elland Road [Leeds United football stadium], especially the most visible displays of paper-selling, etc." (SIRC n.d.). LFUARAF combatted the activities of the National Front at their stadium by distributing leaflets (such as *Terror on the Terraces*) that campaigned against such groups. England's Derby County launched Rams against Racism and Charlton Athletic an anti-racist group called Red, White, and Black at the Valley (SIRC n.d.). The "'Let's Kick Racism Out of Football' campaign was established in 1993 in response to widespread calls from clubs, players and fans to tackle racist attitudes existing within the game" (Kick It Out n.d.). Against this background, the UK government's 1991 Football (Offences) Act and league initiatives that formalized punishments for racist chanting by fans, seem like an afterthought to

the resistance of social groups. Likewise, Mark Doidge (2015b, 160) explains the persistence of racist ideas in the Italian Ultra movement through reference to the fact “that there are few grassroots, fan-led initiatives against racism.”

The Russian authorities have recently begun inciting a social reaction to far-right groups. Active apolitical and left-leaning fan groups throughout Russia have tried to exclude such groups from the stands. In 2015, supporters from the “Red Army” club of CSKA Moscow tried to launch a campaign against the expression of far-right ideas in the club’s football stadium. The racism of the fans in the 2014 season had led UEFA to order the club to play some of its games behind closed doors as well as impose a fine (Dunbar 2014). Initially, the club created Twitter handles such as #CSKAFansAgainstRacism and #WeAreCSKA11. Other plans to combat racism include encouraging all fans to wear shirts and to hold up banners with “CSKA Fans against Racism” written on them (Veth 2015). Such symbols would be seen on television screens across Russia and help to send the message that racist activities will not be tolerated. Just as in Europe, the method relies on social activism rather than state-sanctioned claims.

Further, the Russian Football Union is organizing programs to combat racism ahead of the 2018 World Cup. A search on the rfs.ru website using the Russian term *rasizm* yields seven articles dating back to 2013 that detail attempts to curtail racism. A new “inspector for the struggle with racism and discrimination in Russian football, former player Aleksei Smertina,” was announced in February 2017, for instance. Smertina, who has experience playing in England and France, spoke of his desire to make the Russian World Cup “an example of global tolerance on the football field and beyond” (rfs.ru 2017). Smertina has previously been criticized for saying “there is no racism in Russia, definitely, because you know it does not exist” (Associated Press 2017). Such a statement arguably reveals the erstwhile preference of the Russian football authorities to ignore the racist problem rather than tackle it directly, although initiatives of late have been doing just this.

One example was created under the guidance of the Fare network and the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA), when the Russian Football Union sponsored the social program “we play against racism.” The program is a tournament that would bring together “children from different countries ... to support this program and say with a united voice, ‘No to racism! And we play against racism!’” (rfs.ru 2015). Programs of this type are designed to promote tolerance as a social value within the stands and to mobilize fan resources to isolate and defeat racism and racist attitudes among the archipelago of Russian clubs. Both its sheer existence and the lateness of the response constitute an implicit recognition of the under-institutionalized nature of such values in Russian fan culture.

This section has argued that the far-right groups were able to penetrate so deeply into *bolel'shchiki* subculture

because it was weak and under-institutionalized as it emerged after the Soviet Union collapsed. Meeting no resistance, such groups could promote their ideology among supporters unfettered and so generate greater overt racist sentiment in the sport. Yet overt racism in the culture of Russian football fans is in many ways overdetermined, as there were a few ideological and general-cultural legacies that increased the ease of penetration of such groups. Those legacies are the subject of the next section.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES

While the last section argued that it was a weak fan subculture that permitted racist groups to penetrate deeply into Russian *bolel'shchiki* subculture, there are additional reasons why one might expect overt racism to be a significant problem in Russia. Numerous historical and cultural legacies make the success of racist “entrepreneurs” there unsurprising. This section focuses on demographic, ideological, and conflict factors that made Russian supporters’ subculture unusually receptive to far-right ideas.

First, Russia’s history is different from that of other major European societies. It has the demographic legacy of more homogenous people. Although Russia is a European country, the backwardness of the Russian Empire as compared to the rest of Europe (see Greenfeld 1992) as well as its lack of port cities with ready access to navigable waters meant that Russia never acquired an overseas empire in Africa. Cossack forces did cross the Bering Strait between Alaska and Kamchatka, but the main fruit of their labors was the establishment of Fort Ross in California. The focus of Russian territorial expansion lay in Eurasia. The continued connections between Western Europe and African or Asian territories have resulted in much higher level of non-white immigration to Western European countries than Russia. This has had an impact on the fan culture in the former Soviet states. As Veth notes, “For football fans of the Soviet Union, it was a new experience to see players of different racial backgrounds in the kit of their favourite clubs. Russia and Ukraine have had and continue to have massive problems with racism and hooliganism” (Veth 2016, 281).

Further complicating this situation in Russia was the Soviet understanding of the nature of ethnic difference. The Soviets had embraced a primordial definition of ethnic and national difference that understood such groups as being part of the fabric of social reality and even established ethnic homelands for minority groups in the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Slezkine 1994). In the 1980s, The scholar Lev Gumilev

argued that ethnicity was not a nebulous and “constructed” quality which could be shaped and manipulated, but rather

an entirely objective reality. He often described ethnicity as a biological feature, and referred to ethnic groupings themselves, or *etnosy*, as natural organisms. Like natural organisms, each *etnos* underwent a biological process he called ethnogenesis, i.e. a life-cycle of birth, development, maturity, and decline. He devoted much attention to this ethnogenetic cycle, identifying its various phases and describing the different characteristics that *etnosy* displayed as they went through them. All *etnosy*, moreover, had an organic connection to their homeland. (Bassin 2009, 135)

Gumilev and Yulian Bromley postulated ethnic differences to be the result of different nations' position on the earth and their interaction with cosmic energy rays and thus naturalized identity (Arnold 2014; Arnold and Umland forthcoming; Bassin 2009; Gumilev 1990). Such ideas prevalent in Soviet society would ensure the easier reception of racist ideas throughout Russian society, including *bolel'shchiki* subculture.

Similarly, although the Soviet Union itself was ethnically diverse, there was a particular understanding of diversity that supported use of the residency permit (*propiska*) system to keep groups on designated "homeland" territories and did not promote multicultural mixing (Arnold 2015a). In 1987, for instance, Moscow was one of the world's only capital cities that was less diverse than the country of which it was capital, being overwhelmingly ethnic Russian in a country where Russians were barely half the population (Colton 1995). The image of diversity is that of the mosaic with neatly spaced tiles that do not touch one another, rather than the more chaotic image of the American (and to some extent, European) melting-pot that promotes diversity on the level of daily interactions. By preserving communities intact from long ago and concocting intellectual justifications for why ethnic communities were better off as separate entities, this background provided fertile soil for racist thinking.

Finally, one cannot speak of this era without mentioning the conflict in Chechnya and the related wave of terrorism. The two wars in Chechnya (which lasted from 1994 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2002) and the wave of terrorist attacks that followed contributed to the hardening of racist attitudes in Russian society (Hahn 2007). Sergei Belikov (2011, 81) puts the number of young men who served in the army during these wars at 1.5 million, men who would return home with stories about their horrific wartime experiences. One impact of this experience as a practice of socialization in Russian society (including football subculture) has been to sharpen rivalries and antagonisms between ethnic Russian teams and those of non-Russians. This may, in part, be behind the conception which was popular in the 2000s that certain nationalities committed certain crimes at disproportionately high rates (Newsland.com 2009; Arnold 2016). Together, these demographic, ideological, and

conflictual legacies help to overdetermine the presence of overt racism in the subculture of Russian *bolel'shchiki*.

CONCLUSION

Societies around the world have had problems with racist and violent elements in the subcultures of football fans. In Russia, the association between racism, violence, and *bolel'shchiki* subculture appears to be particularly strong. This article has explained this strong association through the underdevelopment of Russian supporters' subculture at the time when racist organizations both from Russia and the West tried to promote their ideas among football fans. The overt racism of Russian football is thus a product of both domestic and external factors. To be sure, ideological legacies from the Soviet Union and more recent developments in the post-Soviet era have contributed to making this subculture more overtly racist. Yet the particular form that racist sentiments have taken—their use of transnational white nationalist imagery—can only be explained by the presence of such groups.

This article does not attempt to predict whether racism will in fact be an issue at the 2018 World Cup. Although it has given many reasons why that might be the case, it is impossible to tell, as policing will surely be high to prevent such an occurrence. After all, many people (e.g. Arnold and Foxall 2016) argued that there might be terrorist violence at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, but in fact the Games themselves (if not the period leading up to the Games) thankfully went off without serious incident. If the Russian state is to repeat this resounding success in the case of the 2018 World Cup, however, it will be necessary to recognize that the nature of the threat is different—a pervasive risk of low-level violence from as many actors as there are fans, and that can occur more or less at random across eleven cities (rather than a risk of deeply significant violence from a single organization located in one city). Perhaps the pride of fans in hosting the World Cup will be sufficient to prevent violence, especially in the event (unlikely, given their performances at Euro-2016 and the Confederations Cup in 2017) that the Russian team does well. Thus, one of the greatest beauties of "the beautiful game" may be its ability to effect social change, but that is a topic for another time.

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Notes

1. The football hooligan was articulated as a racist in a manner that facilitated the import of particular cultural norms and practices into the English game, in a way that meant people paid less attention to other ways in which racism manifested itself in the game; “a man in his seventies doesn’t comply with the image of what a racist fan is supposed to look like” (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 1999, 428).
2. FARE is described as “an umbrella organization that brings together individuals, informal groups, and organizations driven to combat inequality in football and use the sport as a means for social change” (Fare Network 2017). See also Wachter, Franke, and Purski (2009).
3. For a more detailed discussion of SOVA’s methodology, see Arnold 2010; 2015a.
4. <http://landscrona.ru/articles/index.php?id=3590>, accessed December 26, 2016.
5. The English Football Association produce the “English Football Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Action Plan,” which outlines strategies to tackle racism in the stands. Due to its professional production as well as the fact that reports come direct from referees, one gets the impression that it is more rigorous in its monitoring than is the case for the data for Russia. For the 2015–2016 season, nine incidents of racist mass chanting across all four leagues were reported (TheFA 2016, 35). In the accompanying narrative reports on such racist incidents, it declares that “The players, including Arouna Kone and Steven Pienaar, notified the referee who subsequently briefed both managers and the fourth official. An announcement was then made in the ground over the PA system that racist behaviour would not be tolerated. An arrest was made by police in the days after the game.” Such reporting and the effective action demonstrate the seriousness with which English authorities take racist incidents and give further confidence in the thoroughness of reporting.
6. <http://eng.yabloko.ru/Publ/2002/agency/reuters-230602.html>, accessed December 26, 2016.
7. The rules for *Stenka na Stenku* are as follows: (a) combatants who have been knocked down are no longer part of the fight; (b) fighting shall be carried out face-to-face, chest-to-chest; (c) fighters cannot enter from the side; and (d) there is no swapping sides. The rules were incorporated in organized hooligan fights (Bennetts 2008, 145).
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67FKcMz9Fw>, accessed December 26, 2016.
9. The Italian Ultras have their origins with the Fossa dei Leoni group that was formed in 1968 and supported AC Milan. Some subgroups of Ultras had connections with the far right and consisted mostly of young men who saw the *curva*—the stand from which they supported their club—as their territory, in which they would organize elaborate displays and songs to support their team (Doidge 2015a; Testa and Armstrong 2008). By the 1990s in Italy, the influence of the hard-core Ultras had grown to such an extent that no player, no manager, and not even the club president, could survive unless they were supported by the hardcore Ultras of a club (Doidge 2015b, 167–71; Foot 2007, 335–37).

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